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Ralph S. Moyed

Is Richard Nixon being de-creeped by Soviet spy?

THE FBI'S SECRET REPORT ON A SPY named Fedora one day may have a place in history alongside the reports placing a second gunman on a grassy knoll in Dallas the day John F. Kennedy was killed.

As one who has proposed making Aug. 9 a national holiday to celebrate the anniversary of Richard Nixon's tearful departure from the White House in 1974, I find the implications of the Fedora Report a bit unsettling.

The report suggests, of all things, that Nixon and John Ehrlichman and their fellow thugs had more justification than previously conceded for creating the famed White House Plumbers Unit. The Plumbers conducted burglaries and illegal wiretaps and played a key role in the Watergate break-in.

You can bet that last-ditch Nixon defenders will seize on the thin evidence provided in the Fedora Report to try to rehabilitate their disgraced leader.

The report will be a boon to other authors who make a living rewriting history. There no longer is much of a market for books on the Kennedy assassination. Conspiracy freaks probably are ready for a book that portrays Ehrlichman as a tight-lipped patriot who went to prison to protect a prized American spy.

Revisionists were excited this week when reporter Joe Trento broke the story in the News-Journal papers: The FBI now believes that one of its most prized spies was a double-agent working for the Soviet Union. The story was based on in part on a forthcoming Readers Digest article but was confirmed by independent FBI sources. A day after it ran in these papers, the Washington Post carried a similar report.

According to all accounts, the spy was a Soviet national employed at the U.N. in New York. His code name was "Fedora" and he worked for the FBI for 15 years.

He was recruited in 1962. Until 1977, Fedora provided intelligence information to the bureau in New York.

Last year, after its own intensive investigation, the FBI concluded that Fedora was in fact a double agent who was feeding Hoover and the FBI misinformation provided by his Soviet masters.

Fedora led the CIA to embrace a Soviet defector who backed up the late J. Edgar Hoover's contention that Lee Harvey Oswald was not acting for the KGB when he killed Kennedy. The defector, Yuri Nosenko, was himself suspected of being a double agent for the KGB, but he still works as a consultant for the spy agency and still has contact with CIA operatives.

Trento wrote that Fedora returned to the Soviet Union in 1977 to receive the Order of Lenin.

One piece of misinformation Fedora gave to the FBI had to do with the Pentagon Papers, the celebrated secret report on our Indo-China war that was published in the New York Times. The report was turned over to the Times by Daniel Ellsberg, a former Pentagon official who had soured on the war and left to work for the Rand Corp.

Fedora told the bureau that the Soviet Embassy in Washington had obtained a copy of the Pentagon Papers several months before Ellsberg gave them to the FBI.

He also said that employees of the Rand Corp. with access to the Pentagon Papers also had copies of a document outlining the entire command and control apparatus of the Defense Department.

Hoover personally passed on the information to Nixon in early 1971.

Nixon subsequently formed the Plumbers Unit which broke into the Soviet Embassy as well as the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

The Nixon tapes and a great body of other evidence makes clear that the Plumbers Unit was set up to halt leaks that might be embarrassing to Nixon or American conduct of the war in Indo-China.

BUT THERE IS ENOUGH NEW MATERIAL in the Fedora Report to convince the die-hards otherwise. The report adds the possibility that the Russians might have gotten their hands on the highly sensitive documents revealing secret operations in the Defense Department.

If all of this were so, it would suggest that Nixon and Ehrlichman were not complete creeps but men who were willing to keep their mouths shut and take their medicine to protect a valued spy.

In Ehrlichman's case, the medicine included a jail term. For Nixon, it was early retirement on a fat pension.

All of this raises many questions:

Will Ehrlichman emerge as a hero? Will he write another book? Will he increase his lecture fees?

Will people stop crossing the street to avoid Nixon? Will the former president get invited to the White House? Will Reagan send him to China?

Will Woodward and Bernstein apologize?

Why is the Fedora Report being leaked now? Who is leaking it? Why?

Speaking of conspiracy theories, was the Fedora Report prepared with an eye to rehabilitating Nixon?

And one final question: What was on the missing 18 minutes of tape?

Ralph S. Moyed's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday in the Evening Journal and in the Sunday News Journal.